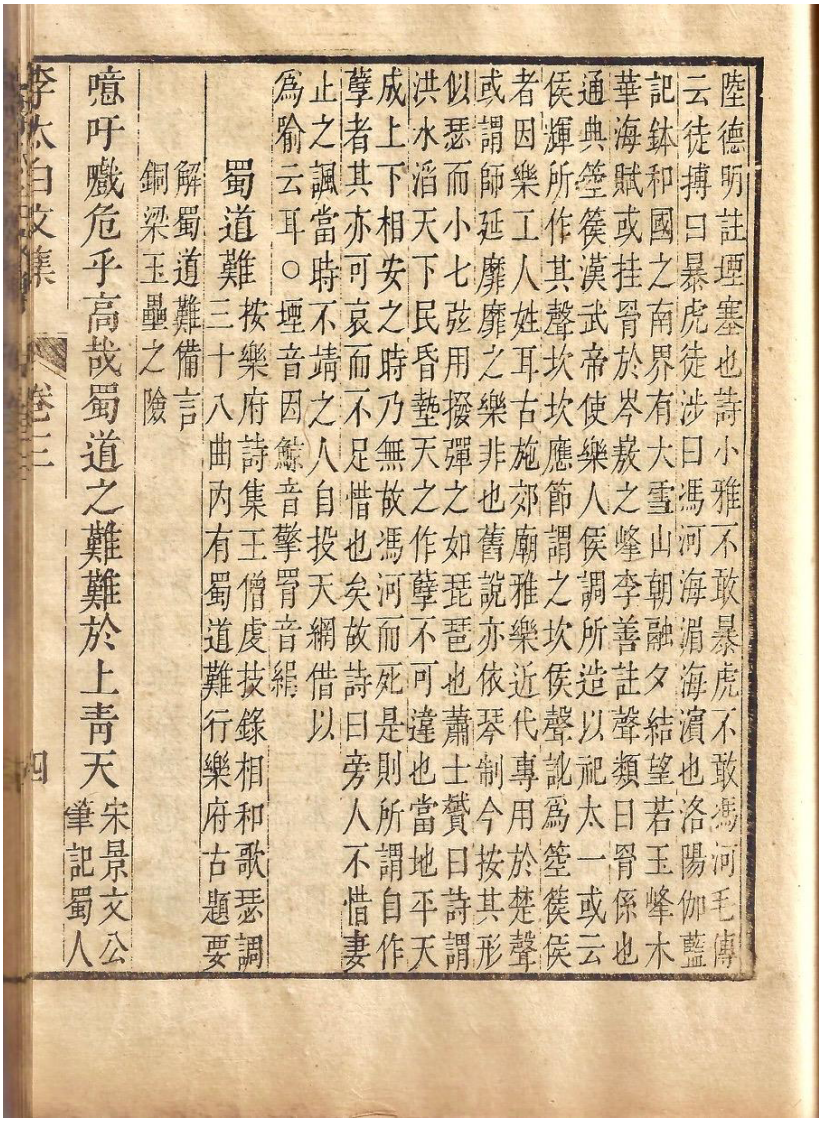
Avatars of Li Bai: On the Production of Tang Poetry and Tang Poets during the Northern Song Dynasty[1]

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In recent years, scholarship on premodern Chinese literature has taken a sharp turn towards reception history (*jieshou shi* 接受史), historical studies of the responses of generations of readers to the works of individual writers. Though this historicist trend is in many ways a welcome expansion of traditional biographical or formal studies, in the study of the Tang it also runs the risk of reaffirming a false confidence in the stability and coherence of "Tang literature," let alone "Tang authors," as interpretative categories. At its most complex, reception history traces messy debates over significance, values, and canonicity through contrasting positions, and it reveals readers engaged in making meaning from the tradition. At its most simplistic and positivist, it reifies in a hagiographic manner the historically formed canonical identity of a given writer and reinforces a teleological narrative about the process of canonization.

In many reception studies we also find a rigid subject-object dichotomy, in which an author's corpus is presented as a unitary object only partially understood (or misread) by reading subjects over time—and the "partiality" of their response is assessed by the contemporary scholar, who implicitly claims a full, correct understanding of the whole. Furthermore, though reception history is aimed at demonstrating the continued but varying impact of a given author's corpus transmitted over time, scholars often fail to nuance the changing cultural and ideological contexts in which readers encountered the corpus, producing narratives of "response" that are often strangely deracinated from their cultural moments.[2] This tendency is especially problematic, I suggest, in studying the transmission of Tang literature over the course of the epistemic shifts of the Tang-Song transition, in which definitions of the literary and its relationship to moral and ethical value were changing irrevocably even as the material conditions of literary production and transmission were also evolving in a new era of print. The multiple cultural transformations of the tenth through twelfth centuries reshaped both


陸德明註堙塞也詩小雅不敢暴虎不敢馮河毛傳云徒搏曰暴虎徒涉曰馮河海涓海濱也洛陽伽藍記缽和國之南界有大雪山朝融夕結望若玉峰木華海賦或挂罥於岑崟之峰李善註聲類曰罥係也通典箜篌漢武帝使樂人侯調所造以祀太一或云侯暉所作其聲坎坎應節謂之坎侯聲訛爲箜篌侯者因樂工人姓耳古旃郊廟雅樂近代專用於楚聲或謂師延靡靡之樂非也舊說亦依琴制今按其形似瑟而小七弦用撥彈之如琵琶也蕭士贇曰詩謂洪水滔天下民昏墊天之作孽不可違也當地平天成上下相安之時乃無故馮河而死是則所謂自作孽者其亦可哀而不足惜也矣故詩曰旁人不惜妻止之諷當時不靖之人自投天網借以爲喻云耳○堙音因鯨音擎罥音絹

蜀道難 按樂府詩集王僧虔技錄相和歌瑟調三十八曲內有蜀道難行樂府古題要解蜀道難備言銅梁玉壘之險

噫吁嚱危乎高哉蜀道之難難於上青天 宋景文公筆記蜀人

Li Bai's "The Road to Shu is Hard," from the 1758 edition of *Li Taibai wenji* 李太白文集, held by the Research Library at the Elling Eide Center, Sarasota, Florida.

poetry, which I give in order, with numbers of poems and *juan* numbers in the third column (since some categories are split across *juan*). Here I rely on the numbers of poems included in Zhan Ying's modern edition, not those in Song's 1068 edition. The color-coding groups the categories in topically or thematically larger sets:

Table 2: Organization of poetry in the *Li Taibai ji*

Category title 類	# of poems	*Juan* #
Ancient Airs 古風	59	1
***Yuefu* 樂府**	144	2-6
Songs 歌吟	81	6-7
Presented [poems] 贈	125	8-11
Sent [poems] 寄	51	11-12
Parting 別	36	13
Farewell 送	102	14-16
Response and reply 酬答	34	16-17
Banquets on the road 遊宴	61	17-18
Ascending high and looking out 登覽	36	19
Travel on the road 行役	24	20
Reflections on the past 懷古	37	20
Poems of idleness 閒適	36	21
Harboring reflections 懷思	11	21
Being moved 感遇	33	22
Expressing reflections 寫懷	12	22
Praise of phenomena 詠物	24	23
Inscribing praise [of things] 題詠	12	23
Miscellaneous praise [of things] 雜詠	17	23
Bedchamber feelings 閨情	56	24
Mourning & grief 哀傷	6	24

Many readers since the Northern Song have critiqued the unevenness and taxonomic irregularity of these twenty-one categories—they include both form, context, and topic, and they vary wildly in size, from the large categories of 144 *yuefu* and 125 "presented" poems to the six poems of "grief" and thirty-three poems on "being moved." But we must recognize both the interpretive problems that Song Minqiu elides with broader categories and the arguments concealed in narrow ones. For example, by not subdividing the *yuefu* into topical categories (as other collections such as the *Wen cui* did), he maintains the image of Li Bai as the master of a form while veiling the diversity of his subject matter. Breaking the *yuefu* up more precisely would

expose the heterodoxy of his topics, including a fondness for romantic vignettes (many composed in women's voices or depicting women's figures in a mildly erotic fashion), Daoist themes,[79] and plenty of drinking.

But as the table suggests, we can easily regroup the twenty-one categories into six larger sets: form, social exchange, fixed topoi, "introspection" (various forms of *huai* 懷), poems on things, and feeling (*qing* 情). In the case of the categories of social exchange represented by "presented," "sent," and "farewell" poems, though of course these had been conventional in collections and anthologies for centuries, they were also undifferentiated, useful containers for uncomfortably flattering verses to patrons, sincere and eloquent addresses to Daoist and Buddhist religious figures, and exchanges with other assorted Tang men he cultivated with verse. And what of the sycophantic poem presented to the Prince of Yong in 757, the "smoking gun" verse from the Rebellion that readers even today have trouble rationalizing? It is safely nestled in the middle of the formal "songs" (*geyin* 歌吟) category. The occasional categories thus work to domesticate Li Bai's corpus in social and formal terms—presenting him as a widely traveled bon vivant with a large acquaintance, famous for his skill in song—and to disguise problematic themes or topics in other ways.

Where the large undifferentiated social and formal categories obscure, the narrower topical categories make claims: the many subcategories of reflection suggest that Li Bai is a poet whose tendency to introspection rivaled Du Fu's, as we see him engaged in "reflecting on the past," "harboring reflections," "being moved," and "expressing reflections." The relatively small number of poems in these subcategories reveal the labor needed to construct them—and we note that even sorting out the "feeling" poems cannot fully disguise Li Bai's preference for sexual passion over grief (fifty-six poems to six), however far down the list those categories appear. Though these categories appear irregular, they are in fact more logically ordered than the categories in the extant Southern Song edition of the *Li Hanlin ji*. Moreover, the *Li Hanlin ji* has only one category labeled *huai* (the monosyllabic term is itself quite unusual in category titles, which tend to use disyllabic compounds), and it contains only forty poems. What Song Minqiu's new organization reveals is a structural approach to representing a "Tang poet." Li Bai is represented as a wide-ranging genius of form and style, a socially well-connected elite male, and a poet of paradigmatic literary concerns. This is not merely domestication but homogenization, according to a model not derived from Li Bai himself but from ideals of Tang writers that Song and others were working to stabilize.

To broaden our focus beyond Li Bai one final time: when we compare this edition to other editions of Tang corpora that Song Minqiu produced with similar categories, we can perceive how his editorial practice reproduces a

specific typology of Tang poet. Examining Song's edition of Li Bai against his edition of Meng Jiao, the *Meng Dongye ji* 孟東野集 (Collection of Meng Dongye), which he had completed a decade earlier, is especially illuminating, because Song Minqiu was Meng Jiao's first and sole editor in the Northern Song, and his edition is the base edition for the one we have today. Moreover, we know from Song's preface that these specific fourteen categories were his own choices for organizing Meng Jiao's scattered and chaotic corpus.[80] As we saw with Li Bai's twenty-one categories, however, we can group Meng's fourteen into the same six larger sets, though here they appear in different order: form, introspection, fixed topoi, social exchange, poems on things, and feeling.

Table 3: Organization of poetry in the *Meng Dongye ji*

Category title 類	# of poems	*Juan* #
***Yuefu* 樂府**	64	1-2
Being moved 感興	65	2-3
Singing my feelings 詠懷	39	3-4
Traveling at ease 遊適	53	4-5
Dwelling in reclusion 居處	39	5
Travel on the road 行役	16	6
Noted and presented 紀贈	33	6
Reflections that were sent 懷寄	18	7
Response & reply 酬答	12	7
Farewell and parting 送別	67	7-8
Praising phenomena 詠物	14	9
Miscellaneous topics 雜題	35	9
Mourning & grief 哀傷	57	10
Linked verses 聯句	3	10

Despite the slightly different order, a comparison of the representation of these categories in Meng's corpus reveals a surprisingly similar construction of two very different poets' work. Though we know of Meng Jiao's admiration of Li Bai, we can hardly imagine two Tang poets whose styles, interests, and personalities were less alike, and yet we see here the same impact of these categories on individual poems in Meng Jiao's collection. Another representation of the distribution of poems demonstrates the similarities but also the relative sizes of the categories in each poet's corpus:

Table 4: Distribution of Li Bai's poetry across large formal and topical categories

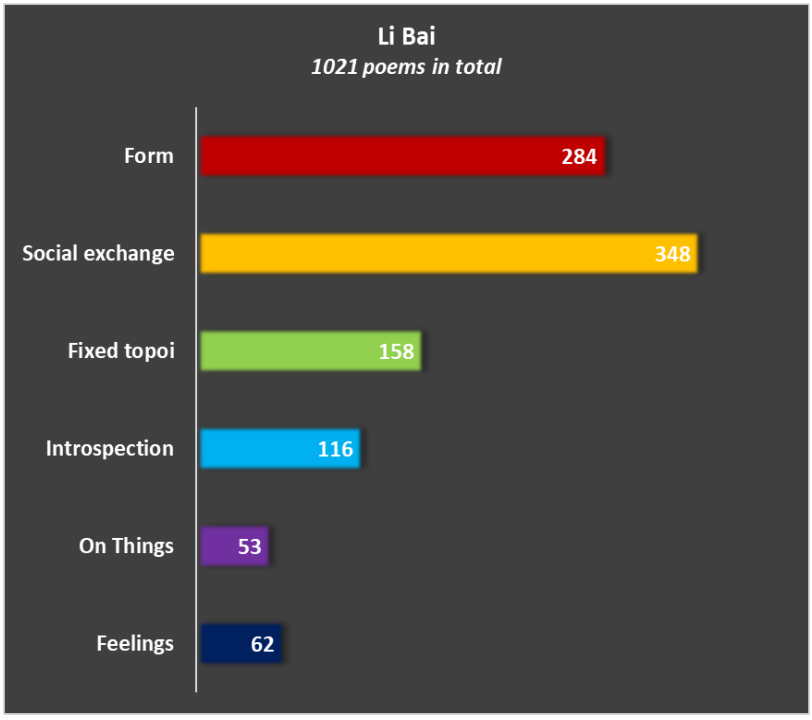
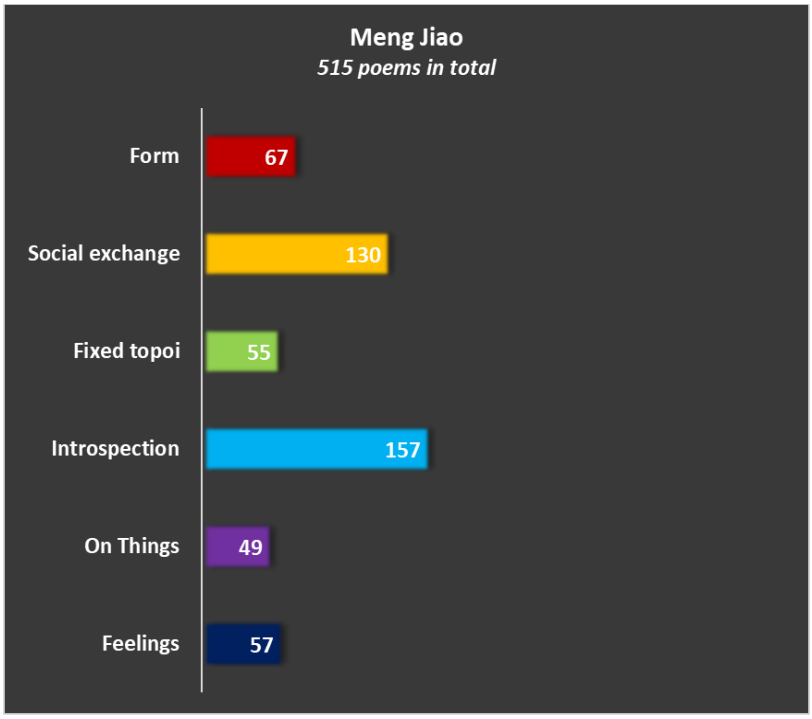


Table 5: Distribution of Meng Jiao's poetry across large formal and topical categories



Where social exchange looms larger in Li Bai's corpus, introspection carries almost twice as much weight in Meng Jiao's work as in Li's—but Meng Jiao's poetic corpus was also only half the size of Li Bai's. The larger categories are equally effective at flattening distinctive features of an individual poet's interests. In Meng Jiao's case, the unsorted *yuefu* disguise not romantic longing or drinking, but rather a constant litany of sadness, poverty, and abandonment; the "being moved" and "singing out" of feelings categories, which hark back to the models of Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263) and Chen Zi'ang, among others, contain some of Meng Jiao's most despairing and violent poems, including his three poems on failing the exams; and the many poems placed in "miscellaneous topics" bear witness to the difficulty of shaping Meng's unusual poetry into intelligible, conventional categories. Grief alone takes up ten percent of Meng's total (57 of 515), whereas Li Bai has only six poems of grief out of a thousand. Despite their different proportions, Song argues for the necessity of "grief" as a category in both poet's collections.

As he did in his representation of Li Bai, Song Minqiu presents Meng Jiao as a poet who embodied certain normative literary and social values that Northern Song poets sought in "Tang literature." Through his categorization of Meng's edition, Song depicts a poet who sustained a wide range of topical and formal interests, cultivated a broad social network, and responded with introspection in the face of moral and ethical conflict. Of these three claims, only the last has a strong relationship to the contours of Meng's poetry. Of course, readers experienced the poems beyond the categories that contained them, and yet we have to imagine that the normative packaging presented these difficult texts in ways that mitigated their more disturbing features. Topics and forms were certainly not the only approaches to repackaging Tang texts—for example, in the biographical *nianpu* 年譜 (chronologically ordered) editions that became increasingly popular from the late eleventh century and flourished in the Southern Song, we see readers seeking literary coherence through a logical narrative structure, drawing cause and effect out of texts that often resisted such readings. Song Minqiu was one Northern Song scholar among many producing models of Tang writers, but over the course of the eleventh century, he became a highly influential craftsman of the Tang literary and historical record. The durability of his approach to producing a "Tang poet"—and its intellectual and cultural contexts in the Northern Song—can be attested in many other collections and scholarly representations of the Tang.

Conclusion

This narrative of Li Bai as an avatar begins and ends in multiplicity, but also with new meaning: from Li Bai the "banished transcendent" to Li Bai as an